

Setting Us Free
Acts 16:16-34
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You know the phrase “no good deed goes unpunished”? You stick your neck out for someone and you end up getting it chopped off. A man approached the gates to Heaven when St. Peter stopped him and said, “Hold on, buddy. You can’t just waltz in there. What have you done in your life that was good?”

The guy paused a second and said, “Well, in 1967, I rescued a puppy.”

“That’s not bad,” said St. Peter. “What else you got?”

“Well, in 1984, I worked in a soup kitchen.”

“That’s OK, I guess. Do you have anything truly spectacular?”

The guy thought a second and said, “Well, one time this group of skinhead bikers started harassing my mom, so I went up to the leader, kicked over the his bike, slapped him in the face, and yanked out his earring.”

“Wow!” said St. Peter. “And when did this happen?”

The guy said, “About 2 minutes ago.”

No good deed goes unpunished. Paul and Silas must have been thinking that in our passage today. You try to do something nice for someone, and all you get for your effort is trouble.

Paul and Silas were in Philippi sharing the gospel and converting believers. They had just converted a lady named Lydia, an affluent lady in the area, and as they were heading to the synagogue, the meet someone on the other end of the social scale: a slave girl with the gift of clairvoyance, who earned money for her masters by telling the future.

The girl starts following Paul and his group, bouncing around them like an eager puppy, announcing, “These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved!” Now at first, you might think this was a good thing. It was like having your power personal billboard following you around. Who needs an agent or a marketing person when you’ve got this kind of publicity?

But there are two problems with this scenario. First, the phrase “most high God” was often used to describe the Greek god Zeus, so the girl may not have been inaccurately representing Paul’s mission. And second, the text tells us she followed them around for many days. Now, I’m sure for the first hour of this Paul and his troops were appreciative. I’m sure in the second hour they were cordial. And I bet in the third hour they were even tolerant. But after two days of this, they get fed up. An eager puppy is cute at first, but after awhile just gets annoying.

So Paul, who was greatly troubled by this attention, exorcises the spirit from the slave girl, freeing her from the demon’s bondage. Time to celebrate and throw a party, right? Not for her owners. They realize that their cash cow has been milked for the last time. No evil spirit, no fortune-telling, no money. So they have Paul and Silas arrested. Geez, you try to do something nice for someone...

Paul’s mistake in this situation was he tried to mixed religion with economics. I’m sure the girl’s owners have nothing against religion, as long as it doesn’t interfere with their business venture. But if saving someone’s life hurts profits, then watch out! So Paul and his gang are arrested and brought before the public court. The Philippi Chamber of

Commerce knows where its bread is buttered, so instead of rejoicing at this girl's healing, they have Paul and Silas stripped, beaten, and thrown into jail.

This was nothing new for Paul. He was used to such treatment. For us today, we can't imagine being jailed for our beliefs. But for Paul, it was commonplace, part of the territory. So what does he do while he whittles away the hours in his cell? Does he pump iron or make license plates? No. He sings hymns. Even in the darkest of hours, he found solace in sacred song.

Apparently, either Paul had a great singing voice, or the hymns he was singing were especially meaningful, because the other prisoners started listening to him. How could this man, body beaten and feet shackled, be singing? Knowing Paul, he wasn't singing "Woe is me" songs. He was singing "Shine Jesus Shine" and "Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee." In our darkest hour, when we are held captive by fear, can we still sing?

So Paul and Silas are harmonizing together on "How Great Thou Art" when there's a great earthquake. Now, this was no ordinary tremor; notice that the earthquake causes the doors of the jail to open and the chains to come loose, but no walls fall down. This was a purpose-driven earthquake. This was an earthquake with a mission statement. Do you get the sense that God might be at work here?

It was thought in ancient times that earthquakes were divine interventions into the human realm, which may explain the jailer's reaction. We haven't heard much about him to this point. We know he's the one who threw Paul and Silas in their cell and fastened their chains. We know he works for Rome. But we also can speculate that when Paul and Silas were singing their hymns, he was listening in, as well, maybe even humming along.

When he sees all the cell doors open, he concludes the worst: all the prisoners are gone. His decision to take his own life was the only noble thing to do for dereliction of duty, because if he didn't kill himself, his bosses would certainly take care of it for him. So imagine the humor of the scene when, just as the jailer is about to throw himself on his sword, he hears a voice coming from the cell: "Wait! Hold on! We're all still here!"

The jailer rushes in to find his prisoners still imprisoned, and he realizes there's a greater force at work here than the Roman Empire. So he asks them to do what the Roman gods couldn't do: he asks them to save him. They preach to him, and immediately he takes them home, washing their wounds (that he probably helped inflict), and the Roman jailer and his family are baptized as Christians.

There is an amazing interplay taking place in this story between freedom and captivity. When you read this story through for the first time, who is captive and who is free? Well, the slave girl is a captive, and certainly Paul and Silas become captives. The girl's owners and the decision-makers of Philippi are free, as is the jailer who watches over and is eventually converted by Paul and Silas. It's pretty clear-cut who is captive and who is free, right?

But freedom can be deceiving. What looks free can actually be anything but. On this Mother's Day, think back to all the things our moms have done for us that we took for granted. When food showed up on the table, we thought it was free. When clean clothes showed up in our dresser, we didn't give a second thought to what it took to get them there. We thought it was free. Did we think about the price our moms paid for our safety and well-being? Of course not.

Which leads me to wonder: Is anything really free? You could argue that we are, here in America. We live in a great country that has fought blood-stained battles to ensure

that we are free. But are we really free? Surrounded by burglar alarms and overflowing medicine cabinets and our own fears spurred on by the nightly news. Our kids can't play outside without supervision, we can't fly on a plane without passing through a security check, we are vulnerable to all sorts of addictions and vices. Is that really freedom?

We're free all right – free to work 7-day work weeks and follow overcrowded schedules, free to sink deeper into debt, free to stuff our bodies full of artery-clogging foods. When we're young we can't wait to get out from under our parents' oppressive reign and be on our own, to be free, and then the rent comes due and the car breaks down. Is this freedom? Are we really free? Or are we held captive?

The freedom we seek is often more illusion than reality. The slave girl's owners thought they were free, but they were held captive by their desire to make money. The jailer thought he was free, but he was held captive by his job and his fear of his boss. And those that we thought were captives in this story end up being the most free. The slave girl is released from her possession, and Paul and Silas are released from prison.

The freedom we think we know isn't the kind of freedom we really seek – or need. That is not to downplay the sacrifices made so that our country could be free. No one is more aware and more appreciative of that than me. But true freedom doesn't come from a government or a war; it comes from knowing Christ, who says in John 8, "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free."

Freedom comes from knowing the truth, and that truth is that Jesus Christ died on the cross for you and for me. The jailer thought he knew freedom, but it wasn't until he heard the gospel that he was truly free. And that truth can penetrate even the darkest of cells. No prison – not grief, not addiction, not anxiety – is too dark for God's liberating power. God's truth cannot be shackled, and its power is at our disposal if we believe.

What holds you captive? What causes the lump in your throat and the beads of sweat on your forehead? What keeps you from singing? Ask God for an earthquake. Ask God to help set you free, to release the shackles. From your vantage point right now, from the bars on your window, you may think that's impossible. But if God can rattle the cages of a Roman prison, if God can convert a hardened jailer, if God can send his son to die on a cross and then bring him back to life, do you think God can help you out of your prison? "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free."